(Un)bounding housing and home: two perspectives

*Housing and Home Unbound: Intersections in Economics, Environments and Politics in Australia***,** Nicole Cook, Aidan Davison and Louise Crabtree, Eds. (Abington and New York: Routledge, 2016. 239 pp). ISBN 978-1-138-94897-6 (hbk), £110.00

*Thinking on Housing: Words, Memory, Use***,** Peter King (London and New York: Routledge Focus, 2017. 56 pp). ISBN 978-1-138-29384-7 (hbk), £48.99

Both *Housing and Home Unbound* and *Thinking on Housing* recognise the hybrid nature of housing as a space of shelter, a place of home, an investment/debt vehicle, a store of wealth and a social symbol and particularly, the multi-scalar ontology of each of these important housing facets. It is indeed remarkable that both books take issue with the terms of housing and home, perceiving them as inadequate. The former opts for merging them into 'housing/home', the latter replaces 'home' by 'housing'. Importantly both books wish to untie housing from its self-evident, discrete physicality but they do this in very different, if not opposing ways.

Cook, Davison and Crabtree's (eds.) *Housing and Home Unbound* conceives housing as a 'meeting ground in which intensive practices, materials and meanings tangle with extensive, financial, environmental and political worlds' (p.1) and aims 'to unbound it in two directions at once: towards the concrete, the intimate and the experiential; and towards the general, the institutional and the collective' (p.1). King's *Thinking on Housing* recognises the importance of these systemic political-economic-environmental frames but opts to dismiss them in favour of a phenomenological understanding of housing as 'the only thing' which is 'not subsidiary to anything bigger' (p.1); metaphorically closing home's door to the external, King reflects how meanings of home and self are created through day-to-day use.

The different ontological positions endorsed by these books have implications for how housing is theorised. The contributors of *Housing and Home Unbound* apply theoretical ideas

associated with ‘posthumanism, naturecultures, actor-network theory, assemblage theory, relational materialism and cosmopolitics’ (p.2) in order to analyse empirically the intersections of housing with economic, environment and political worlds. Conversely King is wont to develop concepts from within housing itself by looking at ‘the gathering of meaning through use’. Both theoretical positions have obvious merits but, as a researcher profoundly interested in the social-construction and lived experience of housing inequalities/injustices, I prefer the former. Indeed, my critique to *Thinking on Housing* is King’s exclusive focus on those who already dwell in warm, decent, affordable, secure and ‘enough’ housing (p.18)—for many do not. I am also not convinced by his interpretation of ‘complacency’ as ‘care-full use’ and ‘aspiration’ as ‘misuse’ of one’s housing, whereby prescribing resident’s acceptance of the status-quo.

Before discussing *Housing and Home* in more detail, I wish to stress that King’s concept of housing is more than a noun and a verb. Through use, housing becomes almost animated, a living thing (or ‘object-less object’) which ‘does’, ‘tends’ or ‘adopts our purpose as its own’. This perspective is in agreement with Marcus-Cooper’s (2006) seminal psychoanalytical research, in which participants and homes were able to converse productively by means of role-playing. I particularly enthused over King’s chapter 5 (‘The consequences of use’), which reflects on the links between memory, housing-as-chronotope and the continuation of self. Methodologically, the reader might find the ‘intuitive approach that is based on introspection’ (p.xiii) rather partial but will certainly take pleasure in the literary style which, through playing on and with words/metaphors, makes understanding King’s philosophical reflections effortless.

If King unbounded housing towards the intimate and experiential, the 12 chapters (excluding editors’ introduction) of *Housing and Home Unbound* extends housing/home towards ‘worlds of finance’ (part I), ‘worlds of nature’ (part II) and ‘worlds of possibility’ (part

III). Editors' introduction (chapter 1) focuses on 'the politics of housing/home' which open both inwards and outwards through power-relations and discourses, including of gender, (neo)colonial history and processes of dispossession, global capitalism and aesthetic sensibilities. The introduction advances some key ontological insights—which help linking chapters into a relatively coherent narrative rather than just a collection of essays—particularly the relational and assemblage-like nature of housing/home, which 'is made rather than given, performed rather than secured' (p.6).

All chapters, authored by established Australian-based academics, construct convincing theoretical and empirical narratives. I liked in particular Veracini's chapter 8 and Cook's chapter 11 which describe social movements opposing the commodification of housing, though more successfully in the past than currently. Indeed, the parallel between residents' and labour union's successful resistance to displacement in the early 1970s in Sydney's Millers Point (chapter 11) and the moralistic eviction of public tenants some 40 years later in the view of state-led redevelopment/gentrification of the same area (Crabtree's chapter 10) is a disheartening testimony on the neoliberal grip on housing. Other neoliberal technologies of accumulation through housing explored in the book include the appropriation of homes within digital, global economies (Rogers' chapter 2), the financialization of nature through aesthetics of place (Davison's chapter 6 and Troy's chapter 7), the transformation of homes into assets (Murphy and Rehm's chapter 3 and Allon and Parker's 4) and the long-standing cohabitation with cars (Taylor's chapter 5). Finally Gabriel's et al. chapter 9 on thermal retrofitting of low-cost homes and Schlunke's chapter 13 on contemplating the ruin of a burnt home come nearest to King's argument of meaning creation through day-to-day use inside the home—although both chapters remain true to the overall aim of the book of linking the intimate to systemic political, economic and environmental worlds.

Housing and Home Unbound's exclusive focus on Australia has the merits of developing an in-depth investigation which allows international scholars to appreciate the tangling of Anglo-Saxon similarities with the reflective specificities of a (neo)colonial society which has symbolically apologised for dispossessing native people of their natureculture ways of being. It can be said that King's *Thinking on Housing* aims towards a geography of self (the time-space of one's memory) and perhaps obliquely to a social geography of the middle-class since dwellings are imagined to be private and adequate, and his method of introspection reveals the middle-class subjectivity of a British academic. And yet it strikes me that King's professed state of grace between resident and home as characterised by complacency with a (far from perfect) house also applies to countries of weak housing policy such as Romania, which shows the poorest housing conditions yet the highest levels of housing satisfaction within the EU (Soaita, 2015). Hence I find his judgement of aspirations as misuse disturbing for much remains unsaid regarding the deep embeddedness of feelings of satisfaction and aspirations within the bigger, systemic frames well accounted for in *Housing and Home Unbound*.

Both books are of significance to students, scholars and hopefully to practitioners in the field of housing studies but, given housing's multi-faceted nature, also to those in other social science disciplines. But their greater relevance should be that of revisiting what housing is and does – to use King's language – in both the realm of the intimate and the systemic in order to promote policy discourses and practices able to tackle what can be now termed a global housing crisis.

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